



# SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS & SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST/GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

## WINTER 2008-09 GUIDE



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## Plowing the parks

"It's 2:30 a.m. and I stare at the snow-depth stick outside my window with a flashlight. Another ten inches in the last six hours!"

Stuart Nuss's first order of business on such mornings? Calling out the other plow operators. Some get roused out of warm beds in the parks; others come up from the valley. They, and the mechanics that maintain their equipment, respond seven days a week.

"Our first priority is plowing to the lodges and residences," continued Stuart, "so that there is access for our ambulance and fire truck in case of emergency."

"Secondary roads and parking lots are next. When those are as good as conditions allow, we start north on the Generals Highway from Lodgepole and south from Grant Grove."

Sometimes the road between Lodgepole and Grant Grove stays closed for weeks, and reopening can be a major undertaking.

Avalanches and fallen trees cross the road along with the heavy snow. "We may just get it open when Mother Nature does it all over again," said Stuart patiently.

Plow operators share the experience of driving large machines on steep, curving roads – in the dark. "Some of the scariest things happen running the rotary plows," said Kirk Stiltz. "They are really heavy – up to 60,000 pounds. There are times when you're operating right on the edge of a steep bank. It's a very tense – and intense – situation."

They've all felt the machine beneath them start to slide. "I came around a curve," remembered Tom McCarthy, "and here was a towtruck helping a stuck car. Although I was going slow, I had to turn to avoid a box of chains they'd left in the road, and I slid sideways right into that car."

Michael Botkin watches approaching cars closely. "I see if their tires are rolling. If they're not, I know their brakes are locked and they're sliding."

Which leads to sage advice from all of the operators: *When you see a plow coming, go slowly but keep moving. Don't stop or ask the plow to stop.*



*Either or both of you might start sliding. And don't assume that, having passed one plow, you won't see another.*

"Not everyone recognizes that conditions change drastically from the valley to up here," said Stuart, "or that they change from one curve to the next. We try to get people to carry a good set of chains and to obey the road restriction signs – they're there for a reason."

Operating a plow here means sharing the darkness with wildlife. "You get an idea of where they're hanging out from seeing their tracks night after night," said Paul Sakaguchi.

"Especially after a heavy snow, you see bear and deer tracks heading downhill, bailing out," Kirk noted.

"Early one morning a mountain lion leaped off a snowbank into the road in front of me," remembered Stuart. "It looked at me, frozen in the headlights, and then was gone. It pretty well covered an entire lane, from nose to tail."

These operators also share a fellowship of sunrises and solitude:

"Despite the long hours, cold and wet conditions, there is really nothing more spectacular than a sunrise over the Sierra," said Stuart.

Paul agreed. "Sometimes you're working the storm into the morning and you see the sun rise. It shines on large ice crystals and looks like there's glitter all over the place. You're the only one out there and it's undisturbed. You get that feeling of solitude."

"When the road is closed behind and in front of you, and the sun is breaking out in a pure blue sky..." That's Tom's favorite part.

Kirk appreciates the storm-washed air. "I really enjoy, time and again, how clear the air is early in the morning when it's been snowing all night – how far across the valley you can see. That's one of the pleasures."

Getting up at 2:30 on a winter morning – at least in Sequoia and Kings Canyon – has a few very special rewards.

*~ Remembering Stuart Nuss, former Engineering Equipment Operator Foreman*